

# All in the family

*Preparing mom or dad for war goes beyond the deployment line*

by Capt. Christa L. D'Andrea  
photo by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

## Getting ready

**Take** care of legal matters such as a will, an estate plan and powers of attorney.

**Create** a family emergency plan.

**Get** your personal and financial information in order. For example, create a folder including all credit card, bank account and insurance policy information — update any information that needs updating.

**Protect** your personal property. Whether married or single, make sure your house and vehicles are in good order before you depart.

A photo of father and son still hangs on the wall above the toddler's bed — a subtle reminder for mom of when daddy deployed at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The photo was hung so the young boy could say “good-night” to his daddy each night while his father was off supporting his country. This small yet important gesture was mom's way of ensuring her 2-year-old remained “connected” with his dad over the next few months.

For many moms and dads across the Air Force, gesture's such as these are helping some families cope while their loved ones are deployed. Care packages, telephone conversations, hand-written letters, instant messaging and a Web camera are just some

of the ways Staff Sgt. Patrick Browne, his wife, Kimberly, and 12-year-old daughter, Amanda, kept in touch during his recent deployment to Southwest Asia. Kimberly said the camera was one way for Amanda to say “look at my new glasses” or “my new hair cut,” and for dad to comment on how big she was getting.

Staying connected during a deployment is essential to keep those “down range” and their loved ones at home emotionally and mentally strong. But, preparing the family before the deployment is what allowed the Brownes to face life's challenges head-on.

## Juggling emotions

Whether separated for six weeks or six months, the distance between

parents and children, husbands and wives, can spark unexpected emotions — anger, confusion, sadness and even denial.

Master Sgt. Mike Snodgrass, the family readiness non-commissioned officer for Dover Air Force Base, Del., said before the deployment, “some spouses question their abilities to handle all of the homefront responsibilities during the deployment.” His number one piece of advice — “sit down and communicate” before the deployment begins.

Ivera Harris, the Family Support Center consultant and director of 17 years at Ellsworth Air Force Base, S.D., agrees that communicating expectations surrounding a deployment, and “making each moment count” prior to it, is critical to prepping for the separation.

That's exactly what the Browne family did. They spent as much time together as possible, played games as a family, went on day trips and talked about concerns such as safety, and what Amanda could do to help her mom out around the house, Sergeant Browne said.

## You're not alone

However, the Browne family didn't have to handle deployment preparations on their own. With more than 30,000 Airmen deployed at any given time, family support centers across the Air Force have stepped up their family readiness programs.

“We have changed a lot. Before [early 1990s] people came in to [the center] to vent and cry,” Ms. Harris said. “But now we are engaging the community, listening to our families to find out what their needs are and tailoring those needs to fit the mission.”

Rather than “one size fits all,” Ms. Harris said today's programs are specifically geared towards families to help keep morale high before and during family deployments.

One of the more popular programs at many bases is a family deployment line. Ellsworth and Dover have been offering this event for three years. The deployment line allows children and spouses to do all the things mom and dad do, Sergeant Snodgrass said. From briefings to immunizations to

## Staying connected

**Send** hand-written letters and care packages.

**Send** e-mails and keep a weekly journal to send to family and friends about your experiences in the deployed location.

**Prior** to deploying, create a video of the deployed parent reading a favorite book for the children left behind to view.

**Take** a digital camera to the deployed location and send photos home.

**Send** children's artwork to the deployed spouse.

**Take** advantage of family support center programs such as “Hearts Apart.”

“deploying,” going through the line offers children an opportunity to touch and feel the same equipment their parents might be using.

“Kids feel more safe knowing mom and dad are staying safe,” Sergeant Snodgrass said. The deployment line gives them a sense of what and where their parents will be living and working in, he added.

Family programs like ice cream socials, spouse calls and car care workshops are now being offered. Kimberly expressed that the basic self-defense course she took through the support center while her husband was gone gave her a “little piece of mind.”

“I knew to contact the family support center,” said Kimberly, whose experience handling long separations gave her a leg up on coping with the deployment. Participating in family programs allowed her to meet friends and try something she hadn't done before — while keeping her mind off the separation.

“We recognize it's hard to be away from the person you love,” Ms. Harris said. “We do not have the ability to change the physical distance; however, we do have the ability to work with members and families on emotional distance.”

## The show must go on

While separation from family and friends is a difficult situation, “life does continue when a spouse deploys,” said Kimberly, whose husband has deployed twice since October 2003.

Sergeant Browne and his wife followed the advice handed out in deployment packages from the family support center as well as their

own instincts. They took the time to ensure the cars, wills, powers of attorney and financial matters were all situated. And Kimberly made sure she and Amanda developed a routine and stayed with it — a fact the deployment packages says helps children feel more secure.

You have to be prepared for the unexpected, Kimberly said. “What may not seem like a big bump in the road when you're together may feel like that when you're apart.”

## Coping with separation

**Find** out as much as you can about the location.

**Address** emotional concerns with your family up-front. Although talking about the separation may be uncomfortable, honest discussion is the best way to alleviate anxieties.

**Reach** out to other people who are going through the same thing. Get involved with programs at your Family Support Center.

**Plan** ahead. Anticipate what will happen after the deployment.

**Find** a routine and stick to it. Many people find routines comfortable.

## Spouses

**Take** time out to care for yourself.

**Stay** healthy and happy.

**Stay** positive.

**Stay** busy.

## Children

**Make** sure children know they are loved.

**Be** truthful with them about the separation.

**Let** children help around the house. Give them a sense of responsibility.

**Help** children mark the passing of time on a calendar or other visual means to count down the days.



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